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Haunted by Hughes

The Reclusive Billionaire's Lingering Power

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Howard Hughes "had a powerful kind of hold over me," says Michael Drosnin, who spent seven years hiding out to write "Citizen Hughes," a best seller based on what he says are the reclusive billionaire's own memoranda.

"There were times when I was writing in a trance—I couldn't get the words down fast enough. It was as if I was the medium through which Hughes spoke. There were times when I was there. I would write with such a feeling of certainty, I had to go back over it to be sure I hadn't gone beyond what I had evidence for. And sometimes I was able to confirm that it had actually happened that way.

"It was a spooky experience. It wasn't ESP, it was just that I was so immersed in the material I could

guess what was right. But when the identification was too strong, I'd look at my bank book and know I was not Howard Hughes."

In the book, Drosnin describes Hughes as he was when he holed up in the Desert Inn Hotel in Las Vegas, from November 1966 to November 1970:

... There was Hughes, naked in his bedroom, unwashed and disheveled, his hair halfway down his back, sprawled out on a paper-towel insulated bed, staring at his overworked television...

The real Mr. Big was surrounded only by filth and disorder. Mountains of old newspapers, brittle with age, spread in an ever-widening semicircle on the floor around his bed, crept under the furniture, and spilled into the corners of his cramped fifteen-by-seventeen foot room, mixed together haphazardly

with other debris—rolls of blue prints, maps, TV Guides, aviation magazines and various unidentified objects.

A narrow path had been cleared from his bed to the bathroom, then lined with paper towels, but the tide of trash overran even that, topped off by numberless wads of used Kleenex the billionaire wielded to wipe off everything within reach, then casually cast upon the accumulated rubbish... united in a common thick layer of dust that settled in permanently over the years. The room was never cleaned...

Amid this incredible clutter, set apart in pristine splendor, stood stack after stack of neatly piled documents. They covered every available surface. Thousands of yellow legal-pad pages and white typewritten memos piled with absolute precision on the dresser, two night tables, and an overstuffed armchair, all within easy reach of Hughes on his bed. He compulsively stacked and restacked these papers, often for hours at a time, taking a sheaf and whacking them down to align one side, then another, endlessly repeating the process until not a page was a millimeter out of place. That was vital.

These special papers were the instruments of his power.

For the four years Howard Hughes made his Last Stand in Las Vegas, he commanded his empire by correspondence. It was the only time in his life that the world's most secretive man regularly risked writing down his orders, plans, thoughts, fears and desires...

A briefcase full of memos—a sample of the 10,000 documents, 3,000 identified by experts as in Hughes' handwriting, according to Drosnin—on which he based "Citizen Hughes," lies on a table in the Embassy Row Hotel cafe. Drosnin, 37, a former reporter for The Washington Post and the Wall Street Journal, reaches out from time to time to pat them, to make sure they are still there.

Drosnin says these internal documents of the Hughes empire, from the supposedly impregnable Hughes headquarters at 7000 Romaine St.

in Hollywood, Calif., were stolen in June 1974. Drosnin says he solved the robbery—which he believes was staged by the Hughes organization—and found the man hired to steal the papers.

The yellow legal-pad pages, a day-to-day record of Hughes' thoughts during his years of isola-

tion, according to Drosnin, are full of the bizarre billionaire's secrets. In these memos Hughes proposes buying not only ABC-TV but the U.S. government. His objectives: to ban atomic testing (especially in Nevada, where he hibernated), to prevent black men from touching white women on television, and to improve the selection of movies on the late, late show.

Hughes attached equal weight to all these aims, says Drosnin.

And the books claims that the papers enlighten other matters:

■ Prior to the Watergate break-in, President Nixon feared that then-Democratic Committee chairman Larry O'Brien knew about a Hughes \$100,000 payoff. Drosnin notes that Bob Haldeman said the famous 18½-minute gap in the Nixon tapes obliterated revelations about Hughes' connection to Watergate.

■ During the Johnson administration, Hughes wrote to Robert Maheu, his close associate: "I think you should try to determine who is the real, honest-to-God bagman at the White House. And please don't be frightened away by the enormity of the thought... Now I don't know whom you have to approach, but there is somebody, take my word for it."

■ Hughes, in a memo, proposed a play-by-phone scheme to make himself bookie to the entire world: "... Men, simply by nature, like to show off. I can just see some minor league V.I.P. out to dinner with some attractive young protagonist of the opposite sex, and he picks up the phone, brought to his table at Twenty-one, and he makes a five or ten thousand dollar bet over the phone. Then he turns to his girl and says: 'Well, I just won ten thousand in Vegas—let's spend it.'"

"Howard Hughes had such an overwhelming personality," Drosnin says, that "even though he was dead I felt as though he pos-

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